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In copertina: S. Giustina e il mago Cipriano, particolare del reliquiario dei santi Giustina e Cipriano (Milano, Castello Sforzesco, Civiche raccolte di arte applicata).

A pagina 1: Croce in lamina d'oro e pietre dure dalla tomba di Gisulfo II/Grasulfo II (Cividale del Friuli).

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ÁDÁM BOLLÓK

CHRISTIANS, CHRISTIANITY AND THE 'NORTHERN BARBARIANS' IN LATE ANTIQUITY AND THE EARLY MIDDLE AGES*

1. *Introduction*

In his greatly influential theoretical essay, *Empire to Commonwealth*, Garth Fowden succinctly describes the political attitudes of late antique eastern Roman ruling circles towards the northern neighbours of their empire during the period of the 'First Byzantine' or 'Christian Commonwealth'¹ as follows: «In the Transcaucasia-Caucasus region and to the north of it, and also along the Black Sea's eastern and northern coasts and on the Danube (in other words on its northern as well as its eastern frontier), Byzantium sought by propagating Christianity and contracting alliances with local rulers to ensure its own security. Constantine himself had encouraged the spread of Christianity among the Goths and Sarmatians beyond the Danube; John Chrysostom twice provided a bishop for the Crimean Goths, Justinian once. This last was but one of a series of attempts made by Justin and Justinian to bolster the northern frontier. Justinian fought and intrigued constantly both in Lazica, at the southeast corner of the Black Sea, and beyond. The Hunnic Sabiri, a nomadic people who lived north of the Caucasus between the Black Sea and the Caspian, athwart the strategic approaches to the passes into Georgia, seem to have become Christians through the activity of Albanian and Armenian Monophysites. Despite both their remoteness and their heresy, these missionaries received considerable support from Constantinople. At much the same time, the Danubian Heruls become Christians and allies. An unsuccessful attempt was also made to convert the Crimean Huns. Heraclius had better luck in making alliance with and propagating Christianity among the Onogur Huns north of the Caucasus»².

In fact, there is no lack of historical accounts testifying to the appearance and spread of Christianity among the nomadic and sedentary populations of East-Central

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¹ In his review of Fowden's book, VANDERSPOEL 1994 suggested that Fowden's 'First Byzantine Commonwealth' (as described in FOWDEN 1993, pp. 100-137) should be more accurately labelled as the 'Christian Commonwealth'.

² FOWDEN 1993, pp. 101-102.

and Eastern Europe³. Suffice is here to quote Saint Jerome who claimed that in his time «the Huns learnt the psalter»⁴, and to mention Gordas, the mid-sixth-century ruler of an Eastern European nomadic tribe (designated as ‘Huns’ by Theophanes) residing in and around Bosporos (modern Kerč in the eastern Crimea)⁵, alongside an earlier seventh-century ruler of the ‘Huns’, perhaps the Bulgarian Organa⁶, and Kuvrat, the mid-seventh-century king of the Bulgars⁷, as well as Bulcsú⁸ and Gyula⁹, the mid-tenth-century Hungarian tribal leaders, all of whom were baptised either in Constantinople or by missionaries sent from or supported by the Constantinopolitan court. Needless to say, the majority of these conversions were politically motivated acts and most often failed to have a lasting effect. Gordas was assassinated by his fellow tribesmen on account of serving Byzantine interests by attempting to convert his people to Christianity¹⁰. Kuvrat’s short-lived empire collapsed a few decades after his conversion¹¹, burying any possible outcomes of his Christian commitment. Bulcsú was executed after the decisive battle at Lechfeld, fought between the ‘pagan’ Hungarians and the Christian Eastern Franks. His sorry end hardly caused serious grief in the Byzantine capital – on the contrary, Constantine VII Porphyrogenetos (r. 912–959, sole r. 945–959), Bulcsú’s godfather¹², is supposed to send envoys to the western ruler, Otto I (r. 936–973) to congratulate him on his military victory over the Hungarians, after which Otto had Bulcsú, who had been taken captive, executed¹³.

A register of the ecclesiastical provinces of the seat of Constantinople, compiled between 787 and the end of the ninth century, most probably in the first decade of the ninth century¹⁴, lists seven bishoprics under the ecclesiastical jurisdiction of the Metropolitan of Doros (present-day Mangup in the southern Crimea). Of these, two were assigned to the Khazars, one to the Onogurs and another one to the ‘Huns’, one of the latter being often, although perhaps erroneously, associated with the ancient

³ For a comprehensive overview, see MORAVCSIK 1967.

⁴ ST. JEROME, *Letter* 107.2 (English translation: FREMANTLE 1893, p. 190).

⁵ THEOPHANES, *Chronographia* AM 6020 (English translation: MANGO-SCOTT 1997, p. 267).

⁶ NICEPHOROS, *Breviarium* 9, writes about a ‘Hun’ chieftain (Greek text and English translation: MANGO 1990, pp. 48–51). Although neither his name, nor his genuine tribal affiliation are specified, scholars tend to assume that he is identical with Organa, Kuvrat’s uncle, mentioned by NICEPHOROS, *Breviarium* 22 (Greek text and English translation: MANGO 1990, pp. 70–71), their main argument being that ‘Huns’ generally stood for the Onogu(ngu)r Bulgars in Nicephoros’s Chronicle, cf. MORAVCSIK 1967, p. 21.

⁷ JOHN OF NIKIŪ, *Chronicle* 120.47 (English translation: CHARLES 1916, p. 197). John relates that Kuvrat «was baptized in the city of Constantinople, and received into the Christian community in his childhood and had grown up in the imperial palace».

⁸ IOHANNES SKYLITZES, *Synopsis Historiarum* 9.5 (English translation: WORTLEY 2010, p. 231). KONSTANTINOS PORPHYROGENNETOS, *De administrando imperio* 40, 64–65 (Greek text and English translation: MORAVCSIK-JENKINS 1967, pp. 178–179), records Bulcsú’s visit to Constantinople and his reception by the imperial court.

⁹ IOHANNES SKYLITZES, *Synopsis Historiarum* 9.5 (English translation: WORTLEY 2010, p. 231).

¹⁰ THEOPHANES, *Chronographia* AM 6020 (AD 527/528) (English translation: MANGO-SCOTT 1997, p. 267).

¹¹ Cf. NICEPHOROS, *Breviarium* 35–36 (Greek text and English translation: MANGO 1990, pp. 86–91); THEOPHANES, *Chronographia* AM 6174 (AD 678/679) (English translation: MANGO-SCOTT 1997, pp. 497–499).

¹² IOHANNES SKYLITZES, *Synopsis Historiarum* 9.5 (English translation: WORTLEY 2010, p. 231).

¹³ Cf. WIDUKINDUS CORBEIUS, *Res gestae saxonicae* III.56 (Latin text: LOHMANN-HIRSCH 1935, 135); DÖLGER 1965, p. 94, No. 664.

¹⁴ DARROUZÈS 1981, p. 32 (date), pp. 241–242 (Greek text); ZUCKERMAN 2006, pp. 204–207.

Hungarians¹⁵. Given that the church provinces of the Onogurs and the 'Huns', and one of the Khazars, are not named after their seats, as was customary at the time, but after the names of the peoples for whose service they were responsible, it is commonly assumed that they may have been missionary bishoprics established with the purpose of converting these nomads¹⁶. A similar situation is suggested in the case of the monk Hierotheos, who was consecrated as missionary bishop by Patriarch Theophylact of Constantinople in 948 before he was sent to the Carpathian Basin at the request of the chieftain Gyula to convert the ancient Hungarians¹⁷.

2. *Historical and archaeological evidence - mutual confirmation or vicious circle?*

Politically backed or not, the missionary activity of monks could potentially be crowned with considerable success. The early medieval Irish monks proselytising on the Continent¹⁸ and Cyril and Method's well-known activity in later ninth-century East-Central Europe¹⁹ are eloquent illustrations of this point. It is therefore hardly surprising that historians and archaeologists alike happily cite the written accounts briefly mentioned in the above when evaluating Christian artefacts showing up in the material record of the 'northern barbarians' and *vice versa*. Of course, even if several archaeological assemblages left behind by these groups were to provide abundant evidence for the presence of 'Christian objects' among the 'northern barbarians', this latter approach is not without its own pitfalls, not least because many of these assemblages contain artefacts decorated with Christian signs, symbols and iconographies as well as so-called 'pagan amulets', food and drink offerings, rich 'grave goods' and horse burials, the last four being generally treated as essentially non-Christian elements by most scholars²⁰. It is thus hardly surprising that both historians and archaeologist regularly call into question whether the label 'Christian' is appropriate at all for describing these 'mixed' assemblages.

This question is doubly tantalising, considering that beside the written sources that contain but brief and often hardly verifiable accounts, archaeology should - under ideal circumstances - be able to offer much deeper insights, or at least glimpses, into the everyday realities of the lives of late antique and early medieval steppe populations. Unfortunately, however, several difficulties arise when a closer look is taken at

¹⁵ Cf. MORAVCSIK 1967, p. 23.

¹⁶ MORAVCSIK 1967, p. 23; RÓNA-TAS 2000, p. 12; cf. also ZUCKERMAN 2006.

¹⁷ IOHANNES SKYLITZES, *Synopsis Historiarum* 9.5 (English translation: WORTLEY 2010, p. 231).

¹⁸ Cf., e.g. VON PADBERG 2006, pp. 42-46.

¹⁹ Cf. the essays in *Cyril and Methodius*.

²⁰ For the challenges posed by the same problems in Western European contexts, cf., e.g., LATER 2012, p. 586 (with further literature). A good overview of the respective assemblages known from the Avar-period archaeological record is offered by a new exhibition catalogue: TÓTH-VIDA-TAKÁCS 2016. Glimpses into various regions of non-Mediterranean Europe can be gained from two collections of papers: MÜLLER-WILLE (ed.) 1997-98; SALAMON-WOŁOSZYN-MUSIN-SPEHAR-HARDT-KRUK-SULIKOWSKA-GĄSKA (eds.) 2012. For a concise summary of the views and arguments of researchers who see the appearance of 'grave goods' unbecoming for Christians and incompatible with Christianity, see SCHÜLKE 1999.

the extant archaeological record. In certain cases, even the most fundamental questions remain open, given that archaeological scholarship is often unable to precisely identify the material heritage of given entities described as ‘peoples’ in the written testimonies. Gordas’s ‘Huns’ represent an obvious case in point in this respect. Of course, this case is by no means the most problematic example from the perspective of the questions scrutinised here since Theophanes’s account leaves no doubt about the ill-fated outcome of Gordas’s Christianising zeal²¹. In other instances, as for example the alleged conversion of the leaders of the Onogurs/Bulgars, archaeology would have better chances to offer material evidence for the possible impacts of Organa’s (?) conversion mentioned by Nicephoros and the Christian Bulgarian ruler’s, Kuvrat’s assumed activity among their people. Even if one were to set aside all the well-reasoned reservations of modern archaeological research regarding the methodological problems surrounding ethnic interpretations of the archaeological record²², the heated debates as well as the uncertain and often contradicting conclusions reached by specialists attempting to identify the material remains left behind by the groups designated as Onogurs/Bulgars in the late antique/early medieval written sources²³ are in themselves discouraging and provide cautionary signs against drawing too specific conclusions from the currently known material evidence. Incertitude in both historical and archaeological scholarship contributes to this state of affairs. Suffice is here to refer to the two most obvious issues, one geographical, the other chronological. As far as geography is concerned, we may note that although for long decades it was a scholarly commonplace to localise Kuvrat’s Bulgar ‘state’ to the Kuban-Don region²⁴, a fairly recent investigation has convincingly demonstrated that in all likelihood the Onogurs/Bulgars resided in the lands located between the Donets and Bug rivers in the earlier seventh century²⁵. As for chronology, one should bear in mind the divergent chronological systems proposed for the Eastern European steppe zone in Soviet and post-Soviet times²⁶, which in certain cases are at considerable variance with all Western and Central European chronologies, and from time to time result in dating particular artefact types, find assemblages and archaeological horizons decades, or in more extreme instances, as much as half a century or more later than expected on the basis of the traditional Western and Central European systems.

As far as the seventh century is concerned, these geographical and chronologi-

²¹ For Gordas’s ‘Huns’ and the archaeological image of Bosphoros and her neighbourhood in the age of Justinian I, see AJBABIN 2011, pp. 84–94 (with the previous literature).

²² There is no place here to review the continuously expanding literature on this topic, and I shall therefore only cite some highly influential works: BRATHER 2004; VON RUMMEL 2008; FEHR 2010; BIERBRAUER 2015; CURTA 2007; CURTA 2011; BRATHER 2011; CURTA 2013. For the problems of Eastern Europe, see BÁLINT 2010a.

²³ For an attempt to assemble the archaeological heritage of the fifth- to seventh-century Onogur-Bulgars from Eastern and East-Central Europe, see RAŠEV 2005.

²⁴ MORAVCSIK 1930.

²⁵ RÓNA-TAS 2000.

²⁶ Cf. the ‘high chronologies’ proposed by AMBROZ 1972; AMBROZ 1972–1973; and followed by BARTOLI-KAZANSKI-KAZANSKI 1987; AJBABIN 1990 and, to some extent, KOMAR 2006. For their criticism, see SOMOGYI 1988; BÁLINT 1992. For a chronology more coherent with the Western and Central European systems, see GAVRITUCHIN 2008.

cal discrepancies have led to conflicting interpretations, which are best illustrated by one of the most famous seventh-century assemblages that was discovered at Mala Pereščepino in present-day Ukraine. It is telling that scholars who accept both a 'lower' date, i.e. the middle third of the seventh century in general, or *ca.* the 650s–660s in particular, for this assemblage and the interpretation of the monograms on the three signet rings as standing for **ΧΟΒΡΑΤΟΥ** (ring 'A') and **ΧΟΒΡΑΤΟΥ ΠΑΤΡΙΚΙΟΥ** (ring 'C')²⁷, harbour no doubts over the identification of the assemblage as Kuvrat's burial²⁸. Others agreeing with this chronology, but proposing different readings for the monograms, or summarily disregarding them, opt for Kuvrat's uncle, Organa, while others, postulating a more eastern localisation of Kuvrat's Bulgaria, have suggested that this rich assemblage in all likelihood reflects a local elite «not mentioned in the written sources»²⁹. Again others, who suggest a 'higher' date for Mala Pereščepino and its circle, i.e. the last third of the seventh century, challenge the above-cited decipherment of the rings, and highlight the Central Asian analogies of the assemblage's deposition rites, arguing that it does not represent a grave, but a memorial site, and identify the Pereščepino horizon with the arrival of the Khazars that ultimately led to the collapse of Bulgar power in the region³⁰. Another contention is that the Pereščepino assemblage should in fact be ascribed to three successive chronological horizons, the implication being that the location was first used as a memorial site by Kuvrat, then by one of his heirs after his death, and finally by a high-ranking Turkish/Khazar lord³¹.

Still, if these uncertainties are disregarded and the sixth–seventh-century material record currently known from the Eastern European steppe north of the Black Sea and the Caucasus is viewed as a database representing the material heritage of populations speaking mostly West Turkic languages/dialects³², who were periodically re-organised under the sway of new ruling families, clans and tribes that gave their names to the respective political entities (generally appearing as 'peoples' in the external Byzantine, Persian, Georgian and other written sources)³³, we can gain a fairly good idea of whether the repeated Byzantine attempts at spreading the Good News of the Gospel among the Empire's northern neighbours with the aim of binding these 'peoples' to Byzantium, or of pacifying them to some extent, had reached at least some modicum of success. Approaching the material from this perspective, the most striking and surprising impression is how few sixth-seventh-century finds of Mediterranean origin/affinity directly connected with Christianity have been preserved in these regions. While the Byzantine silver plates - one decorated with a Chi-Rho and the other with a cross³⁴

²⁷ For colour photos of the signet rings, see ZALESSKĀĀ-L'VOVA-MARŠAK-SOKOLOVA-FONĀKOVA 1997, cat. nos. 13–15: pp. 120–121, 283.

²⁸ For a detailed history of research and an overview of earlier identifications, see BĀLINT 1984; BĀLINT 1988; BĀLINT 1989, pp. 96–100; WERNER 1984; RONA-TAS 2000, pp. 3–7; BĀLINT 2010b, p. 163 n. 613.

²⁹ GAVRITUCHIN 2008, pp. 84, 87.

³⁰ KOMAR 2006.

³¹ Cf. AJBĀBIN 2011, pp. 164–168.

³² For 'West Old Turkic' and the languages once belonging to it, see LIGETI 1986; RONA-TAS-BERTA 2011.

³³ For a different reading of the archaeological record, see CURTA 2008.

³⁴ ZALESSKĀĀ-L'VOVA-MARŠAK-SOKOLOVA-FONĀKOVA 1997, cat. no. 1, pp. 110–113, 266–268, cat. no. 5, pp. 116, 276–277.

- and the strap-ends bearing cross depictions made using the granulation technique of the Pereščepino assemblage³⁵ and the pectoral cross of the Keleğej³⁶ assemblage (in the Crimea) are apparent cases in point, they can hardly serve as appropriate arguments bolstering the written testimonies except for the fact that the Byzantine government did indeed make efforts to win members from among the elites of the northern barbarians for the cause of Christianity and of the Empire. More far-reaching successes do not seem to have been achieved, however.

In contrast, where Byzantine presence was long-standing and in immediate proximity, as in the Crimea, personal objects with Christian significance, first and foremost pectoral crosses³⁷ and belt buckles³⁸, abound in the late antique and early medieval archaeological record. Here, the continuous presence of an ecclesiastic organisation is attested without any shadow of doubt both in various literary sources and the church buildings excavated at Khersonesos, Bosporos/Kerč, Doros/Mangup and Eski Kermen³⁹.

3. A better-researched case study: the Avar-period Carpathian Basin

If politically motivated conversions without long-standing and socially profound consequences are located at one end of an imaginary scale, while the continuous presence of Christianity in barbarian milieus with an established ecclesiastical organisation within and/or in the immediate vicinity of the barbarian populations' territories (as in the case of Crimean *Gothia*) at the other, the situation in the sixth–seventh-century Carpathian Basin may be positioned somewhere in-between. Here, in the region's western, Pannonian part, an ecclesiastical system emerged in Late Roman times that was significantly weakened during the successive waves of the Great Migration, but had probably not entirely faded away when the Avars and their Eastern European auxiliary peoples arrived in the late 560s⁴⁰. Still, although we do not hear about the official conversions of Avar high dignitaries until the disintegration of their state in the wake of the Frankish–Avar wars waged from the very end of the eighth century onward⁴¹, Christian communities seem to have flourished in some spots of the Avar Khaganate during the sixth and seventh centuries. It is perhaps hardly a coincidence that except for a single church building erected in the late sixth/early seventh century at Keszthely-Fenékpuszta⁴², all other remains which surely or supposedly originate

³⁵ ZALESSKAĀ-L'VOVA-MARŠAK-SOKOLOVA-FONÁKOVA 1997, cat. nos. 28–29, pp. 142–144, 295.

³⁶ BÁLINT 1989, p. 95, pl. 40; RAŠEV 2005, pl. 75.12.

³⁷ KHAIREIDINOVA 2012.

³⁸ E.g. VEJMARN-AJBABIN 1993, pp. 12, 100, 108, figs. 5.21, 71.3, 77.11; AJBABIN-CHAJREDINOVA 2009, p. 25, fig. 15.4–6, 9, 15–16, 19, 21, 23; AJBABIN 2010, pp. 412–413, fig. 8.3, 5.

³⁹ AJBABIN 2010, pp. 399–404 (Chersonesos); AJBABIN 2011, pp. 76–80, 114–116, 152–154 (Chersonesos), pp. 110–112 (Mangup); p. 128 (Bosporos), pp. 200–201 (Povorotnoe); PARŠINA 1988 (Eski Kermen).

⁴⁰ For the evidence indicating the survival of a few Christian 'centres', or at least of Christian communities led by an ecclesiastical hierarchy, see VIDA 2016.

⁴¹ POHL 2002, pp. 312–323; SZŐKE 2014, pp. 9–26.

⁴² HEINRICH-TAMÁSKA 2010.

from church buildings or liturgical furnishing have either been found outside the narrowly-defined territory of the Avar Khaganate or are artefacts secondarily reused in mortuary contexts or stray finds⁴³. Thus, the overwhelming majority of finds with Christian characteristics are preserved in mortuary assemblages and, correspondingly, are bedevilled by the problems of interpretation connected to this segment of the archaeological record.

To mention the most obvious difficulty, let me evoke the most often recurring one, namely that the composition of grave assemblages containing Christian elements does not fit into modern archaeologists and historians' expectations of 'Christian burials'. As mentioned in the above, in 'barbarian contexts' these graves are often furnished with 'pagan amulets', food and drink offerings, rich 'grave goods' and horse burials. The nature of the problems emerging around the understanding of these 'impure' assemblages is aptly illustrated by the several conflicting interpretative models that have been proposed in the archaeological and historical literature for explaining the appearance of 'Christian objects', first and foremost of pectoral crosses and artefacts bearing cross depictions, in seemingly non-Christian contexts. For some scholars, it is not only tempting to identify these 'mixed' assemblages as definitely Christian, but according to their line of reasoning, it is the single logical choice, given that the cross must have been regarded as a hostile symbol by non-Christians. Conversely, for others, pectoral crosses were simply adornments or jewellery worn by the late antique and early medieval pagan populations of Western, Central, and Northern Europe, regardless of the fact that these had a religious significance for Mediterranean Christians and non-Christians alike. Scholars challenging a strongly normative reading along these lines either argue for a various range of syncretistic understandings, or suggest that the problem should be approached from a historical perspective and that 'mixed' assemblages originating from a pagan age be identified as pagan, while those buried in a Christian period as Christian, virtually reducing thereby the independent source value of the archaeological record to zero. It has also been proposed that the crosses originating from 'Christian cemeteries' may be interpreted as markers of a Christian identity, while those found in pagan graves and cemeteries should rather be seen as mere jewellery⁴⁴.

The main difficulty clearly arises once we acknowledge that even though all of these approaches gave some truth to them in certain contexts and contain significant oversimplifications in others, they often mutually exclude each other and can easily lead to endless debates citing rigidly applied theoretical and methodological consid-

⁴³ Cf. the corpus of finds in TÓTH-VIDA-TAKÁCS 2016, pp. 228-238; and ŠIMEK 2016 (for a church perhaps already abandoned before the time of the Avars' arrival).

⁴⁴ In the case of the Migration-period assemblages of the Carpathian Basin, arguments for both the existence and, conversely, the lack of Christian communities have been repeatedly put forward, cf. VIDA 1998; VIDA 2002; VIDA 2009a; VIDA 2016; SZÓKE 2000, pp. 310-311 (all with further literature). For a brief overview of the contentions regarding the pectoral crosses in the tenth-eleventh-century material, see BOLLÓK 2012. For an approach based on an analysis of the archaeological context for determining the relation of the deceased to the Christian faith, see BUGARSKI 2009. For the problem of 'Christian cemeteries' in Late Antiquity, see BOLLÓK 2016a (with the previous literature).

erations without a meticulous examination of the available evidence in each case. However, a closer look at the extant archaeological record can shed considerable new light on the old problems. In order to illustrate this point, let me briefly review some lessons of the 'Christian artefacts' of the Avar-period archaeological record, recently assembled and displayed at a temporary exhibition⁴⁵. As the scholarly concept of the exhibition developed by Tivadar Vida clearly shows, it seems reasonable to treat two distinct categories of assemblages separately: the ones regarded as once belonging to the members of the local elites on the one hand, and those considered as the material heritage of the lower social strata on the other. As the above brief review of the written record shows, Late Roman imperial circles and lower officials spared no effort to win the members of barbarian elites for the Imperial and Christian cause. Beside Christianisation, the leaders of barbarian societies were magnanimously showered with lavish gifts and donatives, often in the form of coins and valuable artefacts. Since the material culture of sixth-seventh-century Byzantium was profoundly, although hardly entirely, Christianised, several objects of great value decorated with Christian symbols and images may have been donated to the non-Christian barbarian aristocrats among the usual gifts⁴⁶. Furthermore, it is also well-attested in the written record that members of Avar delegations sent to Constantinople - either for diplomatic missions in the stricter sense of the word or in order to 'receive' the donative provided by the Byzantines in exchange for peace - bought various goods for themselves on the markets operating on Byzantine territories⁴⁷. Among these goods, many objects may have borne Christian decoration, too. Therefore, both latter modes of acquiring Eastern Mediterranean artefacts provided ample opportunities for obtaining various articles bearing Christian signs, symbols and images without the buyer being familiar with the actual meaning of their decoration. It was doubly so in the cases of such fashionable personal jewellery as gold and silver belt ornaments embellished with cross signs⁴⁸, finger-rings with architectonic bezel decoration⁴⁹, and gold earrings bearing crosses⁵⁰ and peacocks flanking a *kantharos* or a palmette⁵¹. In these instances, we may reasonably assume that those who lacked the sufficient knowledge for decoding the Christian message encrypted in the given object forms and their decorations viewed these jewels as little more than fanciful ornaments. However, different contexts suggest different interpretations. The joint presence of a pair of gold crescentic earrings and a circular box brooch bearing a presumably Christian image in Grave 5 of the Keszthely-Horreum cemetery⁵²,

⁴⁵ TÓTH-VIDA-TAKÁCS 2016.

⁴⁶ For gifts changing hands in the context of Avar-Byzantine diplomacy, see BOLLÓK 2015, pp. 169-170.

⁴⁷ MENANDROS, *Historia* Frg. 5.4, Frg. 25.1-2, (Greek text and English translation: BLOCKLEY 1985, pp. 52-53, 216-217, 226-227); THEOPHYLAKTOS SIMOKATTES, *Historia* I.3.7 (English translation: WHITBY-WHITBY 1986, p. 24).

⁴⁸ TÓTH-VIDA-TAKÁCS 2016, cat. no. V.31, p. 251 (SZ. HONTI), cat. no. VI.49, p. 289 (G. SZENTHE).

⁴⁹ TÓTH-VIDA-TAKÁCS 2016, cat. no. VI.28F, p. 282 (A. LISKA), cat. no. VI.36, pp. 283-284 (T. VIDA). For the supposed meaning of these bezel forms, see BLAY 2016.

⁵⁰ TÓTH-VIDA-TAKÁCS 2016, cat. no. VI.37, p. 284 (G. SZENTHE). For a copper-alloy variant, see TÓTH-VIDA-TAKÁCS 2016, cat. no. VI.38, p. 284 (ZS. RÁCZ).

⁵¹ TÓTH-VIDA-TAKÁCS 2016, cat. nos. VI.39-41, pp. 284-285 (O. HEINRICH-TAMÁSKA, G. SZENTHE).

⁵² TÓTH-VIDA-TAKÁCS 2016, cat. nos. V.40, VI.40, pp. 256, 284 (O. HEINRICH-TAMÁSKA).

of a similar pair of earrings and a silver finger-ring embellished with an engraved cross in Grave 21a of the Bóly cemetery⁵³, and the distinct appearance of the sign of the cross on at least five of the twenty-three gold vessels of the Nagyszentmiklós Treasure⁵⁴ (today: Sânnicolau Mare, Rumania) may indeed provide stronger indications as regards the familiarity of the one-time owners of these assemblages with Christianity. This conclusion is perhaps additionally bolstered by evoking the single - at least partially - decipherable inscription of the Nagyszentmiklós Treasure speaking about baptism⁵⁵ as well as by alluding to the fact that the sites of both above-cited graves (the Keszthely-Fenékpuszta fort and Bóly in south-eastern Transdanubia) are located in regions where the presence of Christian communities are generally assumed on account of the mortuary practices and the concentration of Eastern Mediterranean and Christian artefacts in the sixth and seventh centuries⁵⁶.

Similar uncertainties arise, too, when more easily identifiable Christian artefacts, pectoral crosses and circular box brooches, known both from the burials of high-ranking individuals and of more ordinary folks, are considered. Although it is impossible to exclude that some of these pieces arrived to the Carpathians Basin as looted objects or gifts, the majority may represent commercial goods (brought back by visitors from the Carpathians Basin to Byzantium or sold by Byzantine merchants visiting the former region), artefacts brought by Balkanic groups resettled by the Avars in Transdanubia⁵⁷, and local products. We are probably on considerably safer ground in the case of circular box brooches bearing Christian depictions. Seven of them are decorated with images (Archangel, 'Holy Rider'/Equestrian Saint, 'Adoration of the Cross'⁵⁸) that had a well-attested apotropaic function among the sixth-seventh-century costume accessories of the Mediterranean and thus a similar role seems likely in the case of the pieces from the Carpathian Basin, too⁵⁹. Another six pieces bear scenes with a polytheistic/mythological background (Bellerophon vanquishing the Chimera, Zeus with an eagle/apotheosis⁶⁰, etc), which could equally well have been understood in the images' original, polytheistic meaning and have had a new, Christian reading (i.e. interpreting the Bellerophon and Chimera scene as a counterpart of the image of the 'Holy Rider' conquering evil forces, while the image of Zeus and his eagle/apotheosis could be seen as standing for the visual representation of the Ascension)⁶¹. In the latter case, it would be tempting to ascribe a similar, apotropaic meaning to both the genuine Christian scenes and the images with a clear polytheistic ancestry.

Based on the testimonies of Origen, Cyril of Jerusalem, Gregory of Nyssa, Ephraim

⁵³ TÓTH-VIDA-TAKÁCS 2016, cat. no. 29, p. 282 (E. NAGY), cat. no. 39, p. 284 (O. HEINRICH-TAMÁSKA).

⁵⁴ Cf. BÁLINT 2010b.

⁵⁵ Cf. BÁLINT 2010b; ALBRECHT 2015, pp. 140-142.

⁵⁶ Cf. VIDA 2016, pp. 101-102 (with further literature).

⁵⁷ For an attempt at identifying the material heritage of a resettled population, see VIDA 2009b.

⁵⁸ TÓTH-VIDA-TAKÁCS 2016, cat. nos. V.38, V.42-44, pp. 255, 57 (Á. BOLLÓK, O. HEINRICH-TAMÁSKA, T. VIDA); BOLLÓK 2014, pp. 265-267, 271-273 (with further literature).

⁵⁹ Cf. BOLLÓK 2014.

⁶⁰ TÓTH-VIDA-TAKÁCS 2016, cat. nos. V.37, V.39-41, pp. 255-256 (Á. BOLLÓK, O. HEINRICH-TAMÁSKA); BOLLÓK 2014, pp. 264-265, 273-275 (with further literature).

⁶¹ Cf. BOLLÓK 2014.

the Syrian, Nicephoros, patriarch of Constantinople, and other ancient and early medieval Christian authors, I strove to demonstrate in a recent paper that the sign of the cross, and, correspondingly, pectoral crosses were also generally regarded as *apotropaia* by late antique and early medieval Christians⁶². At this point, the archaeological record strongly corroborates the testimony of the written sources. In late antique and early medieval Eastern Mediterranean mortuary contexts, pectoral crosses often appear jointly with further, ‘non-Christian’ amulet types⁶³, while in middle and late Byzantine times, when Christianity was the single most important religion in Byzantium, pectoral crosses, sometimes more than one piece in a single burial⁶⁴, also constitute regular elements of mortuary assemblages. In my view, this strongly suggests that the same apotropaic concern may have been in play when people beyond the Roman world of late ancient and early medieval Christianity buried their dead with pectoral crosses and other amulets.

In order to illustrate this point, let me refer to some examples from the Avar-period material record. A lead pectoral cross was discovered corroded to a fragment of an iron chain mail under the right pelvis of a child in Grave 106 of the Környe cemetery⁶⁵ (fig. 1). A similar situation was noted in Grave 14 of the Alattyán-Tulát cemetery, the burial of a woman, which yielded a small lead cross found next to a corroded piece of iron chain mail. Another pectoral cross came to light from below the woman’s neck, and further lamellae from a plate armour at the pelvis⁶⁶. Although it may be argued in both cases that the crosses themselves were ‘imported’ pieces, their joint appearance alongside other amuletic devices clearly suggests a corresponding function in these burials.

Two perhaps even more telling examples can be mentioned from the very end of the Gepidic or the onset of Avar rule over the Carpathian Basin. A small silver gilt box-shaped reliquary container bearing a punched cross in its centre (fig. 2 n. 2) was discovered among the silver mounts attached to a long leather strap suspended from the belt of the deceased in Grave 84 of the Gepidic cemetery at Szentes-Nagyhegy⁶⁷ (fig. 2 n. 1). A similar find, a rectangular silver gilt mount bearing a cross depiction that had once decorating the long leather strap hanging down from the woman’s belt (fig. 2 n. 3), was recently discovered at Gyula (Site 623, Nagy-Szölő III), accompanied by a gold finger-ring with architectonic bezel and a solidus of Justinian minted between 542-565⁶⁸. These two examples, traditionally dated to the last years of the Gepidic era, but in fact perhaps originating from the first decades of the Avar age on the strength of early Avar-period analogies bearing similar punched and engraved decoration⁶⁹ and the solidus struck for Justinian and the gold finger-ring of the Gyula grave, are

⁶² BOLLÓK 2017.

⁶³ For various examples, see BOLLÓK 2017, pp. 224-225.

⁶⁴ Cf., e.g., WESTPHALEN 2012, p. 132, fig. 5.07/133.

⁶⁵ TÓTH-VIDA-TAKÁCS 2016, cat. no. V.17, p. 247 (G. SZENTHE).

⁶⁶ TÓTH-VIDA-TAKÁCS 2016, cat. no. V.16, 247 (G. SZENTHE); KOVRIG 1963, p. 11, Pl. I.38-39, Pl. I.43-44.

⁶⁷ VIDA 2016, pp. 100-101, figs. 7-8; BÓNA 1976 Fig. 8, Pl. 11.

⁶⁸ TÓTH-VIDA-TAKÁCS 2016, cat. no. V.28, p. 282 (A. LISKA).

⁶⁹ Cf. FODOR-VIDA 2013.

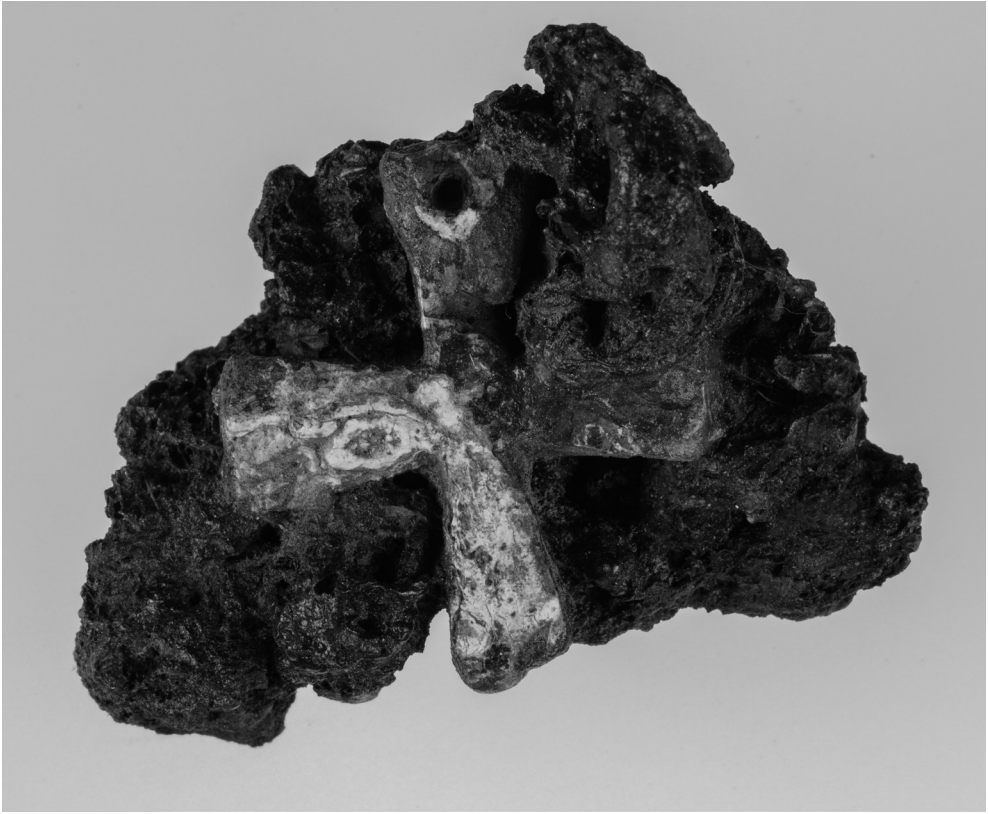


Fig. 1. Lead pectoral cross corroded to a fragment of an iron chain mail, Grave 106, Környe (Hungary).

especially interesting cases in point. As their function and the style of their workmanship clearly testify, both are of local manufacture and deliberately display crosses on a costume element, on the pendent strap so popular among Germanic women, the traditional place where amulets were worn⁷⁰ (cf. fig. 2 n. 1).

As a matter of fact, wearing Christian and 'pagan' amulets as parts of a single set, generally condemned as 'paganism' by the Church Fathers⁷¹ and labelled 'syncretism'⁷² in modern scholarship, both expressing a decidedly negative attitude, was hardly unknown among late antique and early medieval Christians. For late antique

⁷⁰ For these straps and their function, see VIDA 1996; VIDA 1999-2000; GARAM 2011.

⁷¹ Cf., e.g., STANDER 1993.

⁷² As far as I am aware, there is no universally accepted definition of the term 'syncretism' either in religious studies or in archaeological scholarship. For the main trends of scholarship on syncretism and the successive interpretations of the term itself, see, e.g., the brief overviews of AHN-VON PADBERG 2005; SHAW-STEWART 2005. For the problem as seen from the perspective of western European early medieval archaeology, see LATER 2012.

Christians, as has been repeatedly emphasised by David Frankfurter, on the local level of their everyday life, religious 'syncretism' was the norm, rather than a strict observance of the subtle regulations of the theologically well-founded 'Great Tradition'⁷³. The driving forces behind the appropriation of certain elements of one or another of the 'Great Traditions' were effectivity, usefulness and intelligibility. This is particularly true of rituals, amulets, apotropaic devices and the like, in the cases of which efficaciousness was readily measurable. It is thus no coincidence that the same pattern can be observed among the peoples living on the fringes of the Mediterranean world who became acquainted with Christianity through Mediterranean Christians. Neither is it mere chance that amulets regularly surface among grave furnishings, nor that many Christian artefacts appear as amulets in burials, since it was customary among both Christians and non-Christians to wear amulets for protecting their lives and to provide their loved ones with protective devices in death for safeguarding their body and soul⁷⁴. Of course, it is not easy to decide whether the individuals interred with these artefacts had identified themselves or were regarded by their peers as Christians. However, what seems certain is that the presence of Christian 'advisers' living among their non-Christian 'hosts' was an important prerequisite which facilitated the local non-Christians' acquaintance with the power of Christ's cross and other Christian *apotropaia*. Their ranks could equally well have included ordinary Christians, as members of the local ecclesiastic hierarchy. Moreover, as has been persuasively demonstrated by Frankfurter and by others following in his wake, local clerics were among the ritual specialists who produced and peddled in amulets blending Christian and non-Christian traits.⁷⁵ Their teachings, the miracles performed by them and the amulets they offered no doubt played a crucial role in how non-Christians became familiar with the Christian message. We know that conversions to Christianity were often preceded, and inspired, by miraculous acts, healings or exorcisms performed in the name of Christ and the Christian God by holy men whose holy power and superior ritual expertise were confirmed by successfully invoking, controlling and manipulating the supernatural⁷⁶.

4. Conclusion

Although the promotion of the Christian faith played a crucial role in the strategies of Eastern Roman/Byzantine elites to pacify their 'barbarian' neighbours, to keep them under control, and to win them as allies, the success of this imperial policy depended on several interrelated factors. Even if the continuous attempts of the Constantinopolitan government to win the leaders of the 'northern barbarians' for the Christian,

⁷³ For the relation between the 'Great Tradition' and the 'local religious world', see FRANKFURTER 2010, pp. 266-270; FRANKFURTER 2015, esp. pp. 13-16.

⁷⁴ Cf. BOLLÓK 2013; BOLLÓK 2016b.

⁷⁵ See the very concise summary and the literature quoted in BOLLÓK 2016b, p. 54 and esp. n. 131.

⁷⁶ Cf. MACMULLEN 1984, pp. 25-42; FRANKFURTER 2002, pp. 171-172; FRANKFURTER 2003, pp. 257-364, 376.

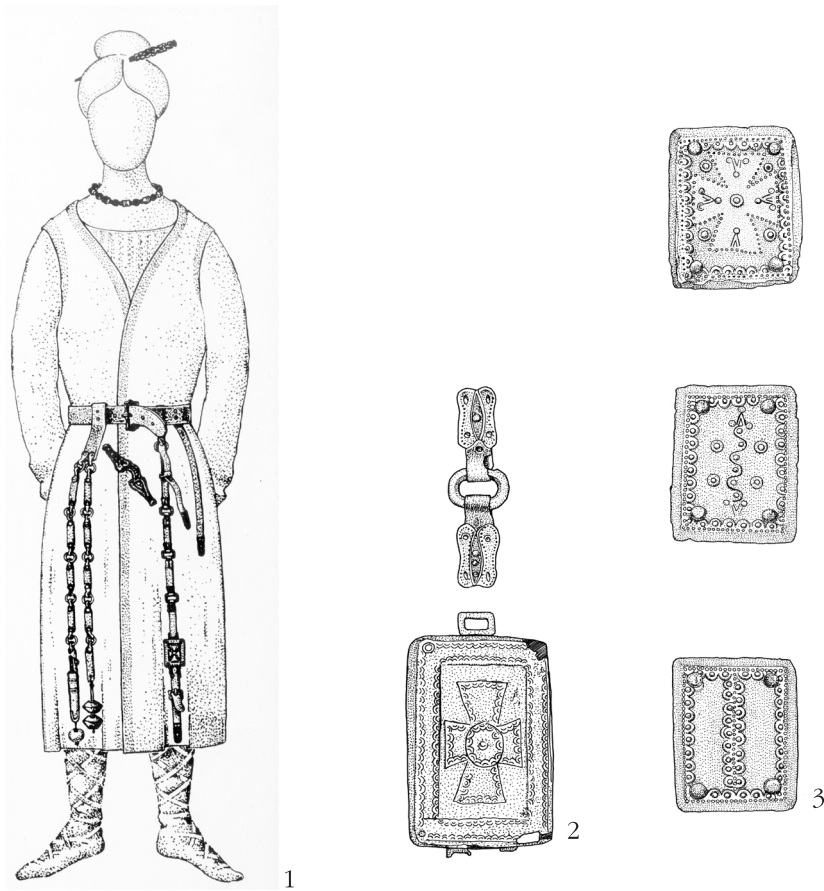


Fig. 2. Mounts and amulets worn on a long leather strap hanging down from the woman's belt: 1, reconstruction of the costume worn by the woman buried in Grave 84 at Szentes-Nagyhegy (Hungary); 2, box-shaped reliquary container and its suspension mount from the same grave; 3, mounts decorating the long leather strap, Gyula (Hungary).

and thereby for the imperial cause resulted in (partial) successes on many occasions, the rhythmic changes in the rise and fall of 'barbarian' ruling elites time and again undermined these positive outcomes. Under more stable conditions and if there were Christian communities living among a particular barbarian people, there was a greater potential for Christianity to strike deeper roots. One typical case in point is the Crimea with its Byzantine settlements and the political advantages of the Christian conversion for the Crimean Goths. Similarly, the Christian communities of Roman origin in Pannonia⁷⁷ and the previous waves of converts from among the ranks of the Germanic

⁷⁷ Cf. VIDA 2009b; VIDA 2016.

peoples (Goths⁷⁸, Gepids, etc.) may, to some extent, have provided a comparable crystallisation point in the Avar-period Carpathian Basin. However, without a political decision made by the ruling elites of the Khaganate, neither mass conversions, nor the creation of an extensive and well-established ecclesiastical organisation appear to have taken place. The crucial role of political decisions, even if their outcomes often quickly faded in instances of short-lived political entities, is quite obvious if one considers the case of the Bulgars on the Lower Danube, who, after the conversion of their ruler, Boris/Michael in 864, became Christians from the mid-ninth century on and were integrated into the framework of the '(Second) Byzantine Commonwealth'⁷⁹. In contrast, the Khazars, who had Christians living in their midst, at least in Itil, their capital city⁸⁰, and who were mentioned in the above-quoted early ninth-century list of ecclesiastical provinces under the jurisdiction of Doros which suggest a serious Byzantine attempt to proselytise among them⁸¹, chose a different path. Their political elite, apparently after some hesitation and following a religious polemic between a Christian monk (Saint Cyril), a Jewish sage and a Muslim qadi, decided to convert to Judaism in 861⁸². One rationale behind this choice was obviously a fear of foreign attempts at influencing Khazar politics under the guise of religious affinities on the part of both Christian Byzantium and the Muslim Abbasid Caliphate. Although a counter-example, it does unmistakably illustrate how deeply late antique and early medieval elites were concerned with the political consequences of conversions, to what extent religion was regarded as an integral part of political connections and how political decision-making influenced long-term religious and historical trajectories.

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⁷⁸ Cf. BOLLÓK 2016b.

⁷⁹ Cf. OBOLENSKY 1971.

⁸⁰ Cf., e.g., DUNLOP 1954, pp. 92-94, 207.

⁸¹ Cf. ZUCKERMAN 2006, esp. pp. 223-226.

⁸² ZUCKERMAN 1995.

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Fig. 1 (photo G. Szenthe, copyright: Hungarian National Museum)

Fig. 2 (1, BÓNA 1976, fig. 8; 2, drawing M. Éber after VIDA 2016, fig. 8.1; 3, drawing M. Éber after A. Liska in TÓTH-VIDA-TAKÁCS 2016, fig. VI.28B-D)